'Certain Beliefs of the Bella Coola Concerning Animals' I

B79-0054/001(03)

this is already set up 6

CERTAIN BELIEFS OF THE BELLA COOLA INDIANS CONCERNING ANIMALS.

T. F. McIlwraith, M.A.Cantab.

Assistant Professor of Anthropology in the University of Toronto and Keeper of the Ethnological Collections in the Royal Ontario Museum of Archaeology.

8

CERTAIN BELIEFS OF THE BELLA COOLA INDIANS CONCERNING ANIMALS.

The Indians to whom the term Bella Coola is commonly applied formerly inhabited the valley of the Bella Coola River, and the shore of North Bentinck Arm in central British Columbia. So far as is known, the first white man to come in contact with them was Alexander Mackenzie who passed through their country to reach the Pacific on his memorable journey across Canada in 1797. At that time the inhabitants lived in villages extending up forty miles of river valley, and the population must have been several thousands. Since then, disease has played its fell part, and some three hundred survivors are all that remain of this once populous tribe. They now live on a reserve near the mouth of the Bella Coola River. Closely akin to them, are the Indians living on South Bentinck Arm, ~~commonly called~~ the Tallio people, and the inhabitants of the head of Dean Channel and the rivers flowing into it, the so-called Kimsquit. ~~people.~~ The languages of these three groups differ but slightly, their beliefs are almost identical, and the people regard themselves as closely akin in every respect. It is, accordingly, justifiable to speak of them as a tribe, terming it Bella Coola from the name of the most important section. They are an isolated northern enclave of Salish-speaking people separated from other Indians of the same linguistic stock by tribes using Wakashan and Athabascan languages.

The most complete account of the Bella Coola is given by Boas in his Mythology of the Bella Coola Indians (Publications of the Jesup North Pacific Expedition, Vol. 2, Part 2). This account contains a valuable collection of myths describing the creation of the Bella Coola world, and the anthropomorphic beings which play such a prominent part in the lives of the people.

The writer made two trips to Bella Coola between the years 1922 and 1924 on behalf of the Victoria Memorial Museum, Department of Mines, Ottawa. The information given in this paper was all obtained during these two periods of investigation. (1).

Like most Indians, and in fact like most so-called "primitive" peoples, the Bella Coola live in a world where the supernatural is all-pervasive. Not only are the forests, rivers, and mountains of their native country inhabited by numerous beings possessing supernormal power which may deal either weal or woe, but every thought and action of the older people is permeated with the supernatural. A sudden idea is caused by the will of a supernatural being, a dream is full of importance, the peculiar action of a dog has its significance; in fact the whole trend of life depends on the supernatural in a way that is difficult for ~~the~~ a white man to comprehend.

Many of the Bella Coola are hunters and as such are well acquainted with the wild animals of central British Columbia. They ascribe to them, however, such powers and capabilities that they merge imperceptibly with creatures of the imagination. Stories concerning the latter, handed down from time immemorial, have been accepted with absolute conviction until the existence of strange monsters has become a living reality. The following is a short account of the more interesting beliefs of this kind.

One of the most dreaded animals known to the Bella Coola is the snɑnɑq, a creature about the size of a Grizzly Bear with beautiful, long, silky hair, blue grey in colour. It walks on its short hind legs, in an almost upright position, with its long fore legs touching the ground at intervals; these terminate in sharp talons, resembling, but larger than those of an eagle. These animals have no tails. Their great

(1). The writer wishes to express his appreciation to the Department of Mines for allowing the publication of this paper, ~~in advance of his full report.~~

10

strength lies in ~~the~~ ability to reverse their eye-balls, causing blinding beams to shoot forth and strike senseless anyone on whom they fall. Every snɑnɑq bears on its back a broad-mouthed basket, into which the stunned victim is thrust. Spikes projecting inward and downward prevent the captive from climbing out and so he is carried away to the monster's lair in the mountains, where he is devoured at leisure. Wolves are such frequent followers that they may be termed attendants. Although mortal weapons are unavailing against # snɑnɑq, they may be overcome by one well-known means. If a hunter cuts himself on the under side of his right leg until the blood flows freely and smears a bullet with this, it will kill a snɑnɑq. Similar success is gained by biting the tongue and coating the bullet with the blood so obtained.

Another animal which is rendered powerless by the same charm is the soq̇s. This beast somewhat resembles a man, its hands especially, and the region around the eyes being distinctly human. It walks on its hind legs, in a stooping posture, its long arms swinging below the knees; in height it is rather less than an average man. With the exception of its face, the entire body is covered with long hair, the growth being especially profuse on the chest which is large, corresponding to the great strength of the animal.

The following story, which is regarded an historical incident, illustrates the attitude of the Bella Coola towards these animals. Not many years ago a certain Qäk'lis was encamped with his wife and child on a fiord near one of the haunts of soq̇s. He heard a number of the creatures in the forest behind him and seized his gun, at the same time calling out to them to go away. Instead, the breaking of branches and beating upon tree-trunks came nearer. Becoming alarmed, he called out once more:

"Go away, or you shall feel my power."

They still approached and Qäk'lis fired in the direction of the

sounds. The answer was a wild commotion in the forest, roars, grunts, pounding, and the breaking of branches. The hunter, now thoroughly alarmed, told his wife and child to embark in the canoe while he covered their retreat with his gun. He followed them without molestation, and anchored his craft not far from shore. The ʁoq̓s could be heard plainly as they rushed to and fro on the beach, but only the vague outlines of their forms were visible in the darkness. Presently, though there was no wind, the canoe began to roll as if in a heavy sea. Qäk'lis decided to flee, but before he had gone far his paddle struck the bottom, in spite of the fact that he was in mid-channel. Looking up, he saw that the mountains were higher than usual; the ʁoq̓s had, by their supernatural power, raised the whole area so that the water had been almost entirely drained away. They are the only supernatural beings with this power. Qäk'lis jumped overboard into water which reached only to his knees, and towed his canoe several miles, the ʁoq̓s following him along the shore. One of the features which the Bella Coola consider most surprising about this incident is that he did not tread upon the fish which must have been driven into the shallows.

This is not the only occasion on which ʁoq̓s have appeared in that vicinity. Within the lifetime of the father of an informant, a chief was returning with some friends along the coast. As the canoe shot around the tip of a promontory, they saw a ʁoq̓s gathering shell-fish. The paddlers backed behind some rocks from where they could watch without being seen. The creature acted as if frightened; it kept looking backwards, then hurriedly scraped up some clams with its fore-paws, dashed off with these into the forest, and came back for more. The chief decided to attack the animal. A frontal approach was impossible owing to lack of cover, so he landed and crept stealthily through the forest, armed with his Hudson Bay Company's musket. Presently he

stumbled upon a heap of clams which the animal had collected. He waited until it returned with another load, then raised his musket and fired. Instead of killing the ʁoq̓s, its supernatural power was so great that the hunter's musket burst in his hands, though he himself was not injured. The ʁoq̓s shrieked and whistled as if in anger, and at once hordes of its mates came dashing out through the forest. The frightened chief rushed out on the beach and called to his comrades to save him. They brought the canoe close to the shore so that he could clamber aboard, and then paddled away unharmed.

The Bella Coola believe that ʁoq̓s, unlike most supernatural animals, have not abandoned the country since the coming of the white man. One man was most insistent that they still lived on the outer coast, and promised to point one out if a visit were made to that spot. The man in question refuses to camp at the place where, he affirms, ʁoq̓s are common. Another informant stated that though he had never actually seen one of the monsters, a horde of them surrounded his camp in the upper Bella Coola valley for a week, and every night roared and beat upon trees and branches.

An animal somewhat similar to the ʁoq̓s is the ä̓ɬäkwis. The Bella Coola state that long, long ago, these lived as human beings on King Island. They were a stramge people, with peculiar rites including the worship of fire. Their neighbours, the Bella Bella, from whom they differed entirely, determined to destroy the ä̓ɬäkwis. A massacre took place, and only a few survivors escaped to one of the lakes in the interior of the island. Here, in course of generations, they grew hairy and lost their human characteristics; it is said that a few paintings made by them still remain. Not many years ago some Bella Coola saw what may have been the last surviving ä̓ɬäkwis. Two hairy creatures were observed fishing from a skin boat on Burke Channel. As soon as

they realised that they were observed, they dashed ashore, broke up the framework of their canoe, and, carrying its skin covering, plunged into the forest. Nothing more seems to be known concerning them. ~~nor do they appear ever to have granted supernatural assistance to anyone.~~

Another supernatural creature is the ʁaʁɹnk'. It somewhat resembles a cow, although its legs are shorter and its body, which is white and hairless, is heavier. In spite of its awkward build, this animal can move so rapidly as to catch birds and ~~animals~~ small mammals with its tongue which can be shot forth to a tremendous length. One of the characteristics of ʁaʁɹnk' is to cause gales. The country where one lives is invariably denuded of underbrush and even pebbles; everything movable is blown away, leaving only trees and gaping holes in the earth. In such regions no fire can be lit. The last known area of this kind is in a river valley near Bella Coola, about four miles from the sea. ʁaʁɹnk' are feared on account of their supernatural power, but appear so seldom that they are practically disregarded.

More common than the last, and accordingly more important, is the haohao. It is an enormous bird with bony wings and long, flexible beak. As it flies, the wings rattle violently, and its note, an oft repeated "Hao, hao, hao," can be heard for miles. These birds are said to have been numerous in former years, and are well known to all Bella Coola.

The most striking characteristic of the haohao, and the reason for which it is feared, is its practice of inserting its long beak into the stomach of anyone sleeping unprotected in the forest and drawing forth his entrails. This can be prevented by standing upright a staff, such as all hunters carry, before going to sleep. Not many years ago a number of men camped at the edge of a canyon near their home, without taking this precaution. One of them was awakened by a slight movement on

the part of a companion and, looking up, he saw the long neck and beak of a haohao projecting over the rim of the canyon and attacking one of his partners in the usual manner. It was the convulsive shiver of the stricken man, now dead, which had wakened the sleeper. He quickly grasped his bow and shot an arrow into the bird's neck, causing it to disappear back over the brink. Presently he saw the long beak again come up and discharged another arrow, with the same result. Again and again this happened, till, with the coming of dawn, no more appeared. The hunter assumed that a single bird had been attacking repeatedly, but, to his surprise when he looked over the edge of the cliff, he saw below a number of carcasses, each with an arrow in ~~its~~ the throat. The canyon must have been a roosting place for the birds. His companions seemed still asleep, but when he investigated he found that all were dead; they had been killed before he awoke, and he had only saved himself by his vigilance and marksmanship.

The beliefs of the Bella Coola concerning the supernatural animals just described are tolerably exact; they know their appearance, what to expect and what to do if one is encountered. In addition to these, they acknowledge the existence of monsters of indefinite form which they term snusx̂. Any supernatural creature, a sasʟnk' for example, is spoken of as a snusx̂ in general, not specific classification. Consequently, what one Bella Coola may describe as a snusx̂ is given a distinctive name by someone else with wider knowledge. As far as could be learnt, there is no designation other than snusx̂ for ~~creatures~~ animals which move from the ocean in April to clear the way for salmon and spend the summer in the lakes of the interior, or beneath the ice of glaciers. They have the power of assuming various forms, sometimes even human, though they usually appear as giant, hairless bear-like ~~creatures~~ beasts with short legs and brown skin.

Their eyes are large, round, and glass-like. In whatever form these creatures may appear, they are almost certain to bring disaster to the beholder. It is said that only a few years ago a white man, having heard of them, went with a number of Bella Coola to a glacier inhabited by them. All the Indians were able to hear ~~the~~ their roaring, ~~of the beasts,~~ louder than the whistle of a steamer, but the white man seemed deaf to it, though the power of the snusx undoubtedly had affected him, for he died on his way back to the village.

Other snusx are said to live near Kimsquit. The father of a woman now in middle-age ~~is said to have~~ once guided a white man to the spot. Through a telescope he saw an enormous animal; he passed the instrument to another member of the party, a Kimsquit Indian, who also saw it, but the effect on him was so powerful that he soon died.

The creature to which the term snusx is most often applied is ~~the~~ one that lives in lakes; it has a huge mouth and can suck with incredible force. More specifically, this animal is termed a skämtsk. One of these is said to have lived not long ago about six miles from Bella Coola, and a small one is supposed to be living even now in Ootsa Lake. The Bella Coola tell a number of stories about the skämtsk of which the following is a typical example.

Within the lifetime of a certain man, still alive, two youths, a chief's son and a poor man's son, went to swim in one of the small lakes near Ootsa Lake. The chief's son, who was ready first, swam out, wearing a fancy belt, leaving his companion on the shore. When the latter was on the point of diving in he heard a dreadful sucking noise, combined with an ominous crackling. He called to the swimmer asking him if he too heard it.

"Yes," came the answer. "But it is nothing," and the youth con-

~~tinued to his~~